

Partners *in Policymaking*

The Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities (ACDD) promotes the full inclusion of individuals with disabilities in many ways.

Council members set policy goals and plan future activities. Grant recipients carry out the Council's vision in a variety of community programs focusing on education, recreation, and employment. And another part of the Council's work specifically educates Alabama's citizens in best practices on disability issues and the most effective way to influence public policy and policymakers. That course is called Partners in Policymaking®.

According to Jayne Chase, coordinator of Partners in Policymaking® of Alabama, the course was begun in Minnesota in 1987 by Dr. Colleen Wieck.

"Dr. Wieck, as the Executive Director of the Minnesota Council for Developmental Disabilities, would go to different hearings

and public meetings and the only people she ever heard providing testimony about people with disabilities were professionals," Chase said. "She thought the testimony would be more meaningful and more accurate if it was coming from people with disabilities and their families. Dr. Wieck realized the importance for people to develop leadership skills and knowledge to effectively partner with those who made policies. That was how the concept for Partners in Policymaking got started."

According to the course website (www.partnersinpolicymaking.com) Partners in Policymaking has now been implemented in 46 states and four foreign countries. More than 13,000 Partners graduates are part of a growing network of community leaders serving on Policymaking boards at all levels of government.

"Our purpose is to provide individuals with developmental disabilities and their

family members the information and skills to become equal partners with people who make policy such as legislators and senators, school board superintendents, city councils, and governors."

Partners in Policymaking began in Alabama in 1991.

"We have a new class every year," Chase said. "We accept applications throughout the year and the selection committee meets in December to review the applications. Each class is made up of adults with developmental disabilities and family members of children with developmental disabilities. We seek diversity among the 25 class participants and select both men and women, people of different races and different disabilities, and people from different parts of the state. Traditionally the family members have been mostly the mothers, but more and more fathers are becoming involved."



Partners *in Policymaking*



Chase said a real beauty of the course is that it is unlikely that parents of children with developmental disabilities have ever been around an adult with developmental disabilities because many people with developmental disabilities have always been segregated.

"Partners in Policymaking provides the opportunity for them to get to know each other and learn from each other. That's the magic."

All the class members sign an agreement saying they will come to all eight monthly sessions. As Chase points out, the ACDD makes a big financial investment in each participant so it's important that everyone be fully committed to the course.

"The monthly sessions are really like building blocks," Chase said, "In the first month we learn the history of people with developmental disabilities. We look at it from the beginning of time. We learn how people were put in institutions or drowned or abandoned simply for

having a disability. It's very painful but the partners have to learn all of that. It's a history that's not known to most people. I always say we are standing on the shoulders of giants, people like Eugene Ward."

In the first meeting, round table seats are assigned to a mix of family members and individuals with developmental disabilities. Seldom does anyone know each other in that first meeting.

"I tell them first that this room is a safe place," Chase said. "Everyone is OK. There are no wrong answers and no one judges. We are all in here to learn together."

Each month has a different theme, and accordingly state and national presenters come to Montgomery to talk to the partners about their special area of expertise.

"The partners learn who these people are and get to know them so they can go straight to them when they have questions. It represents a kind of empowerment beyond what I can de-

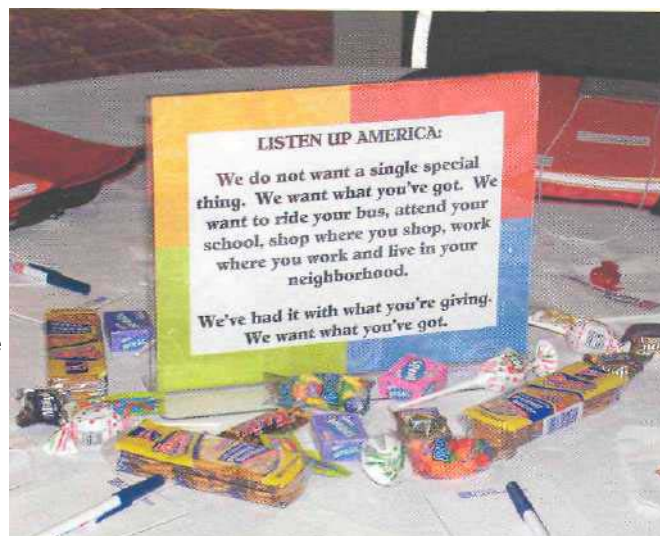


scribe for these partners to be able to go directly to people who make policy. A few of our recent presenters include Olegario D. Cantos VII, Special Counsel to the Assistant Attorney General, Civil Rights Division, U.S. Department of Justice.. He is the highest placed person with disabilities in the federal government. March was education month so we had Dr. Jill England from Ypsilanti, Michigan as our national presenter and Camilla Gibson from the Alabama State Department of Education. Our presenters bring us the most recent and cutting edge information about employment, education, housing, transportation, and other issues. It all focuses on living in the community."

The ideal of all people belonging in the community is central to both the course and to Chase personally.

one should be part of the community. That is what Partners is all about. We don't need special parks or activities, we just need places where we can all go. We need places where everyone participates together and gets to know each other. Segregated programs have prevented that from happening."

"Today life is changing, and this is especially true for children," Chase said. "When kids with developmental disabilities start to school alongside neighbors and friends, people know each other and everyone is



Partners *in Policymaking*



Myra Jones, Commissioner John Houston, and Ollie Cantos congratulate Partners graduates

"In Partners in Policymaking we provide concrete information plus empowering attitudes of inclusion. Partners often hear information we don't hear any where else. We also work with functional skills, like how to serve on boards and councils. We learn to make calls and write letters and state issues that matter. We

part of the community. People with disabilities shouldn't be hidden away."

The Partners Policymaking class goes on two field trips every year; one is to the State-house to watch a legislative session in action, and the other is to the Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center.

"That's where we have our class picture made," Chase added.

"In Partners in Policymaking we provide concrete information plus empowering attitudes of

inclusion. Partners often hear information we don't hear any where else. We also work with functional skills, like

how to serve on boards and councils. We learn to make calls and write letters and state issues that matter. We emphasize effective and in communication."

"Every month there is role playing and team work. For example in the education month Dr. England provided each table a lesson plan and the partners had to modify the lesson to accommodate the assigned student's ability level. They have to work as a team."

"It all comes together. We start off not knowing each other or anything about each other. By the end of the class there are bonds that will last a lifetime. Strangers become friends. I've seen it work. It's magic."





Senator Wendell Mitchell

involved in Partners In Policymaking®

Senator Wendell Mitchell of Luverne is a sixth-term Democratic Senator, Dean Emeritus of the Jones School of Law in Montgomery, and chair of several important legislative committees. In addition to this busy schedule, Senator Mitchell also enjoys a long history of involvement with the Partners in Policymaking class. He became involved, in fact, when Partners was being formed in Alabama.

"It seems like it was the group's first year and they were meeting at a hotel in downtown Montgomery," he said. "They invited me to be on their program because I had been so active in disabilities issues in the past."

Mitchell began teaching classes at that first session and continued to do so for several years. He said his focus in the classes and even later at graduation ceremonies was on legislative issues affecting those with disabilities. Mitchell said his experiences there make him believe "resoundingly" that Partners is a great way to develop self-advocacy skills. But his experiences taught him something even more valuable.

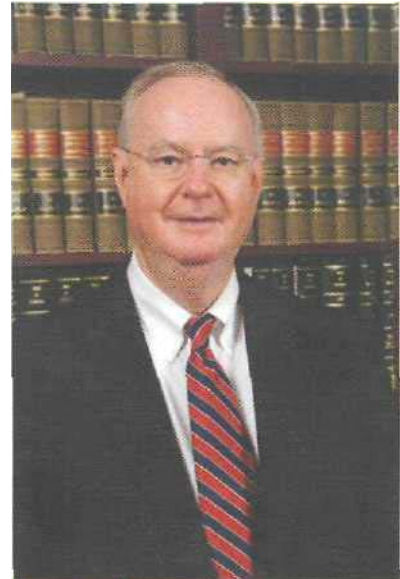
"My experiences with the program have made me both a more sensitive and a more knowledgeable legislator," he said.

"There is no doubt about that. When I first became involved with disabilities issues, I was shocked at my own incorrect perceptions about persons with disabilities, not to mention my own lack of understanding of the issues themselves. And I am still aware of how many of my fellow legislators not only continue to have a lack of knowledge on these issues, but also a lack of interest."

For these and other reasons, Mitchell believes that lawmakers should become involved in the disabilities community.

"Once you cross that threshold of getting involved, you stay involved. Once you have broken down the barriers of preconception and also the realities of what people with disabilities are doing, you cannot help but become a better legislator. At the very least, when issues come up in the Legislature that involve disabilities issues, being involved in some way makes you sit up and take notice and also be more aware of the issues themselves."

"I can honestly say that it has been a great thing for me, and something I have really enjoyed over the years."



Senator Wendell Mitchell

"Once you cross that threshold of getting involved, you stay involved. Once you have broken down the barriers of preconception and also the realities of what people with disabilities are doing, you cannot help but become a better legislator!"

For more information on:

- How to apply for the next class of Partners in Policymaking
- How to apply for assistance through the Consumer Involvement Fund
- How to apply for membership on the Alabama Council for Developmental Disabilities
- How to learn more about disabilities issues in Alabama or become a disabilities advocate

Visit our website: www.acdd.org OR call us at 1 -800-232-2158